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Irish Studies in International Affairs, Volume 32, Number 2, 2021, pp. 371-374  
(Article)

Published by Royal Irish Academy



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# Can British-Irish Cooperation Be Revived?

A RESPONSE TO ‘THE BRITISH-IRISH RELATIONSHIP AND  
THE CENTRALITY OF THE BRITISH-IRISH INTERGOVERNMENTAL  
CONFERENCE’, BY ETAIN TANNAM

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These are difficult times for the relationship between the British and Irish governments. Etain Tannam’s timely article describes and analyses its downward trajectory in recent years. It makes a case for the renewal and strengthening of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC), an institution of the Good Friday Agreement which, as she makes clear, has gone through long periods of inactivity and, she argues, has been chronically under-used.

A number of issues need to be disentangled. First, why is the relationship between the two governments weaker? Tannam lists a number of factors pre-dating the 2016 EU referendum to support the argument that Brexit is not by itself the only cause. She correctly points to a loss of focus and institutional knowledge, particularly but not only in London. However, other reasons she

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.35>

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advances for the marginalisation of the BIIGC—the progressive devolution of more powers to Stormont, and a sense that in the post-2007 period it was not necessary—were at the time essentially positive ones: the governments did not need to maintain the intensity of their engagement from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

While the weakening of Strand Three may have made the relationship less resilient, Brexit, in my view, was indeed the overwhelming cause of present problems. It reopened questions the Good Friday Agreement had side-lined, placed the two governments on different sides of a really difficult negotiation, deepened fissures within Northern Ireland, and led to the election of what is, in regard to Northern Ireland, the most ill-informed and reckless British government in memory. It also, of course, has ended day-to-day cooperation and dialogue on EU issues, the importance of which in developing personal contacts and mutual understanding Tannam rightly underscores (a footnote: it was in fact the British government that wanted to work more closely on Brexit, and was resisted by Dublin as breaching EU unity and risking solidarity).

With turbulence in Northern Ireland, and given the possibility of major constitutional debate, it is clear that there is an urgent need for closer cooperation between the governments, especially at political level. Is the BIIGC the right vehicle for this? Up to a point. The Department of Foreign Affairs, in my experience, shares Tannam's view, supported by the theory of rational institutionalism, that institutionalised cooperation helps bring consistency and focus. The Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (AIIGC) of 1985–99 did function effectively, though for the most part its machinery was most vigorously used to deal with concrete security, human rights and socio-economic issues. High politics, including the intense negotiations leading to the Downing Street Declaration, the Framework Document and the launch of the 1996–98 talks, was conducted through informal channels. By the same token, so have the various discussions required at various times to restore the Northern Ireland executive.

So the BIIGC is not the only way to achieve effective cooperation on Northern Ireland, though it might provide a stronger underpinning of it. It has, however, two particular weaknesses. First, it was modelled upon the AIIGC, loathed by unionists from its inception, the removal of which was a key negotiating objective of theirs (David Trimble secured a commitment to the earliest possible closure of the Maryfield building). Unionist mistrust

of the BIIGC has been a potent factor in leading the British government to downplay it. Second, there is provision for the participation of members of the executive in the Conference: if it were indeed to provide a forum for frank exchange between the two governments, a way would have to be found to minimise this.

Finally, has the BIIGC a role to play in fostering the wider intergovernmental relationship? I am not sure. In the Agreement it is indeed given the task of 'bringing together the British and Irish governments to promote bilateral cooperation at all levels on all matters of mutual interest'. However, this is in a way just a paraphrase of the purpose of the long-defunct Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council of 1980 (of silver teapot fame), and the bulk of the relevant section is Northern Ireland-focused. Broader cooperation on many matters can take place within the British-Irish Council. It might be better for the BIIGC, if it can be revitalised, to devote itself to Northern Ireland.

As is mentioned in the article, an alternative approach was taken by David Cameron and Enda Kenny in launching a separate process of dialogue and cooperation in 2012, involving a work programme and annual meetings of the most senior officials across many departments to prepare summits. However, while ambitious, this initiative did not achieve as much as hoped for. Departments (e.g. Finance and the Treasury, or the Home Office and the Department of Justice) had their own direct channels for sharing information. Concrete EU cooperation mostly took place among officials in Brussels. To a considerable extent, topics for discussion were dreamed up rather than imposing themselves. The major exception was Brexit, and there the Irish government rejected any formalised cooperation. In practice, when they met the taoiseach and prime minister spent more time on the issues of the day than on any set agenda.

Therefore, while a structure for future discussion and cooperation should have value, this should not be exaggerated. There may not always be a large menu of enticing subjects—necessary to keep busy and pragmatic politicians involved. A smaller partner always faces a challenge in seizing and maintaining the attention of the bigger. The Irish government could usefully help keep the British informed on EU developments, though the UK has an extensive diplomatic presence in Brussels and in major EU capitals. And Ireland will continue to be very cautious about being sucked into discussion of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol and to being seen by EU partners as too close an ally of the UK.

Finally, looking through a wider lense, relations between the governments are just one part, and not the most important, of the British-Irish relationship as a whole. The depth and health of economic, educational, cultural, human and sporting networks and connections, while they can be assisted by official support, do not require much action by governments to continue to thrive.